

**STATEMENT OF MS. TRACEY THERIT, CHCO  
OFFICE OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION/  
OPERATIONS, SECURITY AND PREPAREDNESS  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
"STRENGTHENING METHODS OF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION  
FOR VA'S WORKFORCE"  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**MARCH 22, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) health care hiring and staffing opportunities, as well as the state of VA's human capital management programs. I am joined today by Ms. Jessica Bonjorni, Chief, Human Capital Management, Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

We are here today to discuss the steps we are taking to recruit and retain VA's number one asset, our employees. We know that an investment in our employees is an investment in Veterans.

The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act), which was signed into law on August 10, 2022, marked the largest and most significant expansion of Veteran care and benefits in decades, empowering VA to deliver additional care and benefits to millions of Veterans and their survivors. We are grateful for this opportunity, and now that the bill has become law, it is our job to implement it in a way that is seamless, efficient and timely for the Veterans we serve—and most importantly, ensure that eligible Veterans can receive the care and benefits they deserve.

We immediately began implementation when the legislation became law. To expedite Veterans' access to PACT Act-related benefits, we made all 23 presumptive conditions in the PACT Act applicable—the day the bill was signed into law—rather than following the phased-in approach allowed by the Act. We also launched [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT)—a one-stop-shop website for understanding the PACT Act and applying for benefits—as soon as the Senate sent the bill to President Biden's desk for signing. Additionally, we have enhanced 1-800-MyVA411—an easy-to-remember telephonic front door for Veterans and their supporters—to include self-service PACT Act Frequently Asked Questions and seamless navigation to 24/7 live agents to address Veterans' concerns. And we immediately began executing a comprehensive, targeted outreach effort to encourage Veterans and survivors to apply now for PACT Act-related care and benefits.

These efforts have already generated enthusiasm among Veterans and survivors. On August 11, 2022, one day after the PACT Act was signed into law, [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT) garnered more than 3.3 million views. Since the PACT Act was signed,

as of March 4, 2023, Veterans and their survivors have filed more than 1,185,301 total claims, an increase of more than 25.4% over the same period last year. As of March 4, 2023, VA has received more than 362,000 PACT Act- related claims since August 10, 2022, and completed over 157,000 claims. —

VHA also executed a successful pilot of the new toxic exposure screening required by section 603 of the PACT Act and implemented a nationwide effort to screen Veterans who already get care from us to determine potential toxic exposures. As of March 7, we have screened nearly 2.3 million Veterans, with 42% reporting exposures. Effective November 8, this is a routine part of care in every medical center in the country. In addition, it allows us to refer Veterans directly to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) as they may qualify for additional benefits, or an increase in their priority group.

VA has taken steps to implement the priorities within title IX of the PACT Act. VA quickly established an integrated project team (IPT) with internal and external stakeholders to identify the policies, procedures, systems and training required to implement each section of title IX. IPT meets on a weekly basis to address any issues that arise during implementation and track progress. Implementation has resulted in the following several new tools to help with recruitment and retention:

- Removing restrictions on hiring housekeeping aides;
- Modifying statutory limitations on awards and bonuses;
- Enhancing systems to improve hiring;
- Increasing limits on expedited hiring of post-secondary students and college graduates;
- Increasing student loan repayment limits;
- Increasing the cap on special contribution awards;
- Increasing the limits for recruitment, relocation and retention incentives and payment of retention incentives as a lump sum upfront;
- Increasing the limits for and the number of critical pay positions; and
- Increasing the limits for special salary rates.

Ensuring that VA has the appropriate mechanisms in place to track, measure and provide oversight of PACT Act title IX implementation is a VA priority. We will continue to develop and refine metrics ensuring we can measure the effectiveness of these authorities and the impact on VA's recruitment and retention efforts. VA is tracking progress through recurring reports and dashboards with oversight by VA governance processes.

VA is hiring more staff across the Department to ensure that care and benefits are delivered in a timely manner. VA is also focused on improving employee experience to achieve better outcomes for Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors, which makes sure that we keep the Veteran at the center of everything we do. VA is implementing new hiring authorities and new retention authorities to grow and maintain a diverse, talented workforce with a shared mission to provide more care and benefits to

Veterans. VBA is using the recently approved Direct Hire Authority for its mission critical occupations. VBA was able to increase its total workforce by more than 5% (more than 1,300 employees) in the first 4 months of fiscal year (FY) 2023, compared to less than 1% growth in the workforce over the same time period in FY 2022.

We are proud to report that our emphasis on hiring more competitively led to a record number of more than 48,500 hires in VHA last year, and we are well on our way to exceeding that number this year. VHA's total workforce grew by 7,868 employees (2.1%) in the first 4 months of FY 2023. This represents VHA's highest growth rate in more than 20 years.

VA currently stands at 447,327 employees and continues to grow each year in response to increased demand for its services, improved access to care and benefits, reduced wait times, improved quality, enhanced Veteran satisfaction and overall mission growth. VHA accounts for approximately 89% of VA employees, and most of the additional staffing needed at VA in the past 5 years has been in clinical occupations, which account for approximately 63% of VA employees. As the largest integrated health care delivery system in America, VA's workforce challenges mirror those faced in the private health care industry. Across the private health care sector, hospitals and ambulatory care centers have reported higher turnover, increased labor costs and increased reliance on travel nurses. While VA's turnover rate has historically been extremely competitive at or below 10% annually, that rate increased to 10.1% in fiscal year 2022, due in part to higher wages and bonuses offered by private health care systems coupled with Coronavirus Disease 2019 pressures and burnout.

Despite these challenges, VA's unique mission attracts new employees yearly, and nearly 30% of VA's workforce are Veterans themselves, who identify closely with our mission. Other unique benefits attracting employees include working for a nationwide health care organization that provides flexibility to move to facilities in other parts of the country without leaving VA employment, while maintaining a single professional license or credential. VA benefits also include scholarships for employees to gain education in a critical shortage occupation, loan repayment to help those who already completed their education, liability protection, work schedule flexibilities, telework options and the opportunity to participate in cutting-edge medical research.

VA is responding to concerns raised by customers and other stakeholders about delays in the hiring and onboarding process through rollout of its Candidate Care Model. The Candidate Care Model is a framework and set of tools supported by customer experience principles that will assist VHA hiring managers and Human Resources (HR) specialists in providing an outstanding onboarding experience for candidates. VHA has spearheaded initiatives to standardize and improve the onboarding process, including work done by VHA HR standardization teams, an onboarding deep dive conducted by the Veterans Experience Office and an onboarding rapid process improvement workshop conducted by VHA Human Capital Management. The result is a new modernized and interactive onboarding experience that redesigns candidate

touchpoints with fewer people across fewer systems, infused with consistent, candidate-friendly messaging.

To mitigate some of the hiring challenges in clinical occupations, VA continues to lead the way in using telehealth and mobile deployment clinics to reach Veterans living in areas defined as health professional shortage areas. VA is a leader in virtual health care delivery and is well positioned to expand in this area. Additionally, VA continues to use direct hiring authorities; recruitment and retention flexibilities and incentives; hiring initiatives; virtual trainee recruitment events; improved employee engagement; HR modernization; workforce planning; targeted recruitment of military spouses and Service members transitioning from the Department of Defense; national recruiter programs for hard-to-fill occupations and specialties including in historically underserved communities and regions; and strategies for filling Medical Center Director positions throughout VA.

## **Conclusion**

I am proud to be part of this noble mission to care for the Nation's Veterans. I look forward to working with each of you on this Committee on health care hiring and staffing opportunities across VA, as well as investing in our current employees so they can continue to provide the best care and service to deserving Veterans and their families. This concludes my testimony. My colleague and I are prepared to respond to any questions you may have.